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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001488

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SUBJECT: DAS Kramer Meets with Civil Society Leaders

Ref: A) Minsk 1437, B) Minsk 1387, C) Minsk 1343, D) Minsk

1473

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

1. (C) Summary: On December 6, EUR Deputy Assistant Secretary David Kramer met with civil society leaders who

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called for increased support to independent media, including radio broadcasts and, above all, print media. The amendments to the criminal code (approved by both members of Parliament on December 2 and 8) were a sign that Lukashenko is frightened, but would be effective in scaring many potential political activists. They also predicted that the GOB would hinder independent observations during the presidential election, even with OSCE presence. End Summary.

Belarus' Situation and Elections

2. (C) DAS Kramer told civil society and human rights leaders that Washington's interest in Belarus continues to grow and asked what the U.S. could do to help democratize Belarus. Lumila Gryaznova, leader of the Human Rights Defenders Alliance, told Kramer that the situation in Belarus was not as bad as it looked. Gryaznova noted the recent amendments to the criminal code, which introduce prison sentences for giving "false information" and protesting (ref A), was proof that the GOB leadership was genuinely afraid. However, she admitted that the amendments would limit the opposition's ability to form a movement before the elections. Gryaznova added that activists must continue working together using tools it currently has available, such as the single candidate. People should not panic or be afraid and aim for change in 2006, not in 2007 or 2008.

3. (C) Kramer asked whether the bill of amendments to the criminal code would significantly intensify the level of repression in Belarus or just formalizes the GOB's actions that were already in place. Deputy Director of the NGO Partnership Irina Bronitskaya pointed out that had the new bill been a law when she was arrested in October, her ten-day sentence in jail would have been two years in prison. Gryaznova did not expect the authorities to use the law to its full extent and disagreed with leader of the Women's Independent Democratic Movement Lumila Petina that the GOB would use the law to arrest key opposition figures. Deputy editor of independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya (NV) Svetlana Alinkina opined that it would scare people from participating in pro-democracy activities.

Foreign Radio Broadcasts and Media

4. (C) Gryaznova claimed that people constantly complain to her about the lack of independent information and do not believe what they hear on television. Alinkina told Kramer that the independent media was the most important instrument to initiate change in Belarus. However, it was suffering after losing contracts with state printing and distribution companies (Ref B). NV is now printed in Smolensk, but its distribution with GOB monopoly Belpochta will end in January, denying 30,000 subscribers their daily paper. Alinkina claimed that the independent press was critical to the election campaign of independent candidates and, as a last resort, volunteers would have to distribute the papers.

5. (C) Kramer asked the activists for their assessment of the effectiveness of foreign radio broadcasting and its impact in Belarus. Petina opined that FM broadcasts would be effective, but needed to be implemented quickly so that people were aware of the station well ahead of the

elections. Radio, however, should not be a substitute for the written press. Gryaznova agreed and noted that radio broadcasts should provide not just news, but analysis and modern music in order to grab the attention of the majority of Belarusians.

16. (C) Kalinkina disagreed that radio broadcasts would have a significant effect in Belarus because Minsk, which is the only place in Belarus where a popular rejection of Lukashenko's regime would commence, is too far from the country's borders to pick up the signal. Satellite TV and radio frequencies would be a better option since the GOB would have more difficulties scrambling the signal. Kramer said that satellite TV was unpractical because of the money and time needed and that the U.S. would like to see

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broadcasts begin by January.

17. (C) Zhanna Litvina, director of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, opined that activists and their supporters must change their behavior to adapt to current conditions in Belarus. The independent press needs as much legal help as possible to survive and should not try to be an equal competitor to Belarusian TV or Soviety Belarus. Secondly, the independent press has the needed technology and know-how to continue its work underground, but would need material assistance. Noting that the UNDP was ending its internet support program as of February 1, Litvina stressed that more funding should be directed to develop internet news portals and alternative sources of information. Lastly, all radio broadcasts should be legal and legally financed. Television is more effective, but it is impossible in Belarus, so radio broadcasting is the most viable option.

18. (C) Litvina opined that the Belarusian language should be used in radio broadcasts. She noted that Belarus was a separate nation, not a part of Russia, with its own language that it should not be ashamed of. Gryaznova did not necessarily disagree, but told Kramer that in order to grab the majority of Belarusians' attention, radio broadcasts must speak their common language, Russian. She noted average citizens turn off the radio or toss aside newspapers if Belarusian is being used. Radio broadcasts need to first establish contact with the audience. Afterwards, Belarusian could slowly be worked into the programming.

Election Observations -----

19. (C) Bronitskaya told Kramer that her organization planned to observe the elections, but would face difficulties since Partnership's registration expired. In 2004, Partnership observed the Parliamentary elections, but now over 50 percent of Partnership's activities have stopped. After Bronitskaya's and three other Partnership leaders' arrests in October (ref C), the organization is primarily concerned with members' safety and how to gather, share, and report information.

10. (C) Bronitskaya just returned from Moscow where she met with the OSCE and ODIHR to discuss Belarus' presidential elections. To date, Belarus' Central Election Committee (CEC) has not invited OSCE observers to watch the election process. Bronitskaya is positive that the GOB would eventually invite the OSCE, only because the government risks portraying itself badly in front of the world. However, the head of the CEC indicated that the election-monitoring mission should not be large so as not to "interfere" with the work of the election commissions. Bronitskaya added that under the current election monitoring regulations, observers are not physically able to observe much of the election proceedings. According to Bronitskaya, the OSCE mission in Belarus is slowly changing its methods after realizing that being politically correct and trying not to offend the GOB does not work. Of course election observers from the CIS would be invited and will do a "pretty" job claiming the elections were legitimate. Bronitskaya predicted that Belarus would soon adopt Russia's method of financing pro-government observers to achieve the desired results.

11. (C) Kramer told Bronitskaya that during his December 6 meeting at the MFA (ref D), he stressed Belarus' obligation to invite OSCE observers as soon as possible. He noted that in order to accurately observe the elections, OSCE observers need to be on the ground and not invited at the last minute.

12. (C) Litvina opined that all independent civil society organizations were hostages to the upcoming presidential election. She warned Kramer that if all financed NGO projects were focused only on the 2006 elections, then the democratic movement and international partners would lose

much more afterwards. Civil society groups and their donors must keep projects going and help Belarusians who have questions about their future.

Keep Up the Good Work

13. (C) DAS Kramer told the leaders that he would not be doing his job if he did not pass on President Bush and Secretary Rice's commitment to Belarus. He said that their

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work was critical to Belarus' future and all its citizens should take pride in what they do. Such leaders as those of civil society organizations are what keep the world optimistic that things will change in Belarus.

Comment

14. (C) The group of women presented DAS Kramer with a variety of views about the prospects for democratic change in Belarus, but all expressed optimism that the current situation would not last forever. Small steps to change seemed to be the group's approach. In order to see this democratic change, all stressed that the independent media needs to be supported and people should not be afraid of the GOB's draconian measures.

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